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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000265

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: AN ENDORSEMENT THAT MATTERS

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: In a public letter to party workers, Sonia Gandhi unequivocally endorsed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, making it virtually certain that he would remain Prime Minister if the Congress Party leads the next government. Manmohan Singh has built a good and clean image around the country, which should prove to be a solid plus for the party in the campaign for the April-May elections. No mention was made of the 76-year old Prime Minister's health; Singh is currently recovering from recent quintuple bypass surgery. Sonia Gandhi's move dampens any hopes Pranab Mukherjee or A.K. Anthony harbored of moving into the top spot. It also signals that Gandhi has decided for the moment to hold her son back but feels secure in the Manmohan Singh-to-Rahul Gandhi succession. End Summary.

Over-the-Top Praise

12. (U) Sonia Gandhi strongly endorsed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's leadership in a message to party workers. Writing in the "Letter to Congressperson" column of the latest issue of party magazine Sandesh, Gandhi said of Singh: "He has led the UPA government with great distinction. He has many more years of service both to the party and the country. We look forward to his continued leadership and his inspiration to the younger generation particularly." Gandhi lavished further praise on the Prime Minister, endowing him a litany of qualities, including wisdom, sagacity, humility, simplicity, resolve, sobriety and dignity.

Media Focus on "Prime Ministerial Candidate"

13. (U) Subsequent coverage in the media, however, focused on the fact that Gandhi stopped short of formally declaring Manmohan Singh the party's Prime Ministerial candidate going into the April-May parliamentary elections. Confronted later by a flood of questions from the media as to whether or not the Congress Party had a declared Prime Ministerial candidate

for the April-May elections, party spokeswoman Jayanthi Natarajan dodged, saying Manmohan Singh "is the Prime Minister and there is no vacancy for the post."

Comment: Good Branding

14. (C) Assuming his health permits -- he is recovering from recent heart surgery -- it is a virtual certainty that Manmohan Singh will be the Congress Party's de facto Prime Ministerial candidate in the election campaign. He has over the past five years built an attractive brand image as a decent, honest and principled man, untouched by the corrupting rough and tumble of the Indian political game. Delhi has been plastered recently with a poster picturing Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. It is clear that these three will be the public face of the party during the coming elections.

Comment: Holding Back Rahul

15. (C) Sonia Gandhi's unequivocal endorsement of Manmohan Singh obviously reflects her thinking that this is not the time for Rahul Gandhi to transition into the top job. There are a number of reasons to hold Rahul back. Mrs. Gandhi may be doing so because she doesn't think her son is ready yet. It could also be that, given how muddled and uncertain the political environment looks today, she does not want to risk tying him to a Congress Party setback in the elections. Her

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support for Singh implies, however, that she has confidence in the Manmohan-to-Rahul succession, whenever that happens. A strong performance by the party in the elections would strengthen the likelihood of an early succession. Sonia Gandhi's endorsement also means that Pranab Mukherjee and A.K. Anthony's chances of moving into the top job have been dealt a blow.

Comment: Playing a Facade

16. (C) The flurry of excitement over Sonia Gandhi's failure to mention the magic words -- "Prime Ministerial candidate" -- has to do with the Congress Party's dogged practice of not declaring its Prime Ministerial candidate in advance of elections. Instead, it insists on a facade in which newly-elected legislators vote to fill the post. The Nehru-Gandhi family believes this mechanism gives it several advantages. When a family member is involved, it allows the family to play the pretense that it is bowing, at considerable personal sacrifice, to the popular democratic wishes of its legislators even though everyone knows that a legislator would pay dearly if he/she went against the wishes of the family. This "policy" became a party mantra in 1999 and 2004, when the party, fearing the country was not willing to accept Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister, used it to deflect relentless questions about whether or not she had Prime Ministerial ambitions. For Chief Ministerial posts, the policy allows the Nehru-Gandhi family to control the state parties by keeping several aspirants in the running so none is strong enough to question its decisions and all must turn to the family for answers.

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